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## SPECTERS OF BLANQUISM: INTERVIEW WITH THE INVISIBLE COMMITTEE

NONPOLITICS BLANQUI, COMMUNE, FRIENDSHIP, INVISIBLE COMMITTEE, MARXISM

I was interviewed by the *Invisible Committee* for my newly-released book *Communist Insurgent: Blanqui's Politics of Revolution*, which I encourage all my readers to buy a few copy of. The interview covers a wide range of topics related to all-things Blanqui and may help those unfamiliar with him before delving into the book. Since the interview is in French, I am providing my original English language answers below.\*\*\*\*

### **What is the biggest lesson of Blanqui for our days?**

Even though the power of the "end of history" narrative was waned in recent years, it still lingers over the heads of revolutionaries like a sword of Damocles. We are told that socialism is an impossible dream or that even imagining revolution is tantamount to insanity. Many socialists, communists and anarchists accept this ideology and limit their horizon to a few token reforms. In this vision, communism might be an attainable dream in another thousand years while billions suffer in the here and now.

Louis-Auguste Blanqui's great merit is that heaps scorn on the reformist facade. He recognizes it not as a surer road to communism, but as surrender to capitalism. Blanqui's lifetime was spent fighting and organizing for revolution. He refused to compromise on the goal, stating that communism was the end of the freedom to enslave and exploit. He never surrendered or backed down, no matter how hopeless the situation. He thought sincerely and seriously about how to take power and liberate the people.

What revolutionaries today should emulate from Blanqui is his idealism, courage and dedication. While Blanqui's ethic is scorned by pragmatic bourgeois "socialists," I have to wonder how much better our movements would be if we faithfully took it up? We should state clearly and proudly, as Blanqui did, that we are communists and that we should accept the consequences of our commitment that a revolution is required to emancipate humanity. Blanqui knew that communism was something worth fighting for and it still is. Finally, while remaining critical of Blanqui's methods, we should stay faithful to his revolutionary spirit by thinking soberly and illusion about how to win.

### **Blanqui had a lot of concerns with justice. Did he write about prison, the repression?**

Blanqui did not write any major work on the role of prisons in bourgeois society. However, this does not mean Blanqui had nothing to say about prisons. He recognized that the capitalist state was a "police force of the rich" and that prisons – along with the army, police, and the church – existed to ensure the domination of the ruling class. He knew that the courts and prisons did not ensure justice for the workers or revolutionaries, but denied it. Blanqui did not recognize the right of courts to judge him, but most famously in his 1832 speech to the Cour d'Assises,, he made used his trial as a forum to declare war on the bourgeoisie.

In the 1840s, Blanqui spent time in the prison of Mont-Saint-Michel, which was used by the Orleanist dynasty to house political prisoners. The conditions in the prison were deplorable. The cells were too small and infested with vermin. Many of the prisoners had their health broken as a result. The warden and the guards were abusive to the prisoners, sending many of them to long spells in solitary confinement. Blanqui used his contacts on the outside to smuggle out word about the prisons, embarrassing the Orleanist dynasty and leading to reforms.

While at Mont-Saint-Michel, Blanqui and the other prisoners formed close bonds of solidarity. It was very clear to Blanqui and his comrades, that if they didn't stand together, then they would remain at the mercy of the guards. These bonds were so strong that when Blanqui was offered a royal pardon by King Louis-Philippe, that he refused. Blanqui said that he preferred the solidarity of his comrades to an odious royal pardon.

While Blanqui did not write a major theoretical work on the role of prisons in bourgeois society, throughout his life and struggles, he understood that prisons were an instrument of domination and fought against them.

### **Is "Blanquism" just avant garde?**

It is largely true that Blanquism was the idea of a small elitist group taking power by a coup? Blanqui believed that the revolution could not come from the self-emancipation of the working class (who were blinded by religion). Rather, the revolution depended on a select group of virtuous men who were tightly-organized and trained in the use of arms. They would rise up on the appointed day, take power and rule on behalf of the people, until they were sufficiently enlightened to rule on their own. Blanqui believed that the success of the revolutionaries depended solely on the perfect development of a conspiratorial organization. So revolution was largely a technical question for Blanqui.

He possessed no comprehensive theory, such as Marxism, to provide detailed study of the objective factors needed for revolutionary success or to identify allies, plan strategy, and decide when conditions had grown ripe for revolution. His conspiracy was cut off from the working class by design, so they had no role to play in their own liberation.

However, Blanqui's resort to conspiracy was forced on him by circumstances. It's true that Blanqui did not organize mass or democratic proletarian parties like those of the later French Marxists. The simple reason is that the working class was still in embryo in France and those type of organizations were only forming at the end of his life. He grew up during the First Empire and the Restoration when open republican and revolutionary agitation was not possible. Anyone who organized openly for political change would either end up in jail or be killed. In fact, Blanqui was politicized in 1822 at the age of 17 after watching the public execution of four republican soldiers. The only form of organization open to Blanqui's generation were underground conspiracies such as the Carbonari (the first group he joined). Naturally, Blanqui turned to the only means of agitation available to him and perfected it throughout his life. Blanqui did engage in open agitation whenever possible, such as the early days of the July Monarchy, but in general that was only for brief periods since it invited arrest.

If Blanqui wanted to be a political activist, he had to operate underground if only to ensure organizational survival. Blanqui did not establish links with the people because doing so could have fatally compromised the movement by allowing the police to identify and round up revolutionaries. In Blanqui's mind, it was better for revolutionaries to stay hidden until the day came to strike.

It is important to remember that Blanqui was 43 years old the first time he experienced a republic. That was in 1848 during the Second Republic. He did organize a political party with open meetings, a newspaper, demonstrations, running candidates, etc. However, he never forgot that even a republican state existed to protect the interests of the ruling class. Blanqui did not forget that even a republic, unless it was controlled by the workers, served only the bourgeoisie and all freedoms gained remained under threat. In 1848, he warned the people of the threat of counterrevolution. He turned out to be right about that considering that the workers of Paris were massacred during the infamous June Days, followed by the rise of Louis-Napoleon and the Second Empire.

To conclude: while Blanqui believed an elitist and hierarchical conspiracy was the only road to power, we should remember that during his lifetime, no other ways of revolutionary organization were even possible.

### **On the eve of the Commune, Thiers refused to exchange him, even against many hostages. Was he so dangerous?**

The answer is yes. Thiers recognized that if Blanqui was present at the Commune, the outcome could have radically changed.

The Paris Commune was one of the greatest revolutionary episodes in history, establishing the world's first dictatorship of the proletariat, but it was hampered by a number of fatal weaknesses that ensured its defeat. One was a poorly organized military force. Second was the lack of a centralized leadership. Lastly, the Commune remained on the defensive too long, giving Thiers valuable time to reorganize his army.

Blanqui himself was captured the day before the founding of the Commune, so he wasn't there. What could have happened if Blanqui was present? Now alternative history is all speculation and unprovable, but let us speculate nonetheless. For one, all the different factions of the Commune whether the First International, Proudhonists, Jacobins, not to say the Blanquists admired Blanqui as a dedicated and selfless revolutionary. So it's possible that he could have provided needed leadership to the divided Commune. Based on his own writings on armed uprising, it is safe to say that Blanqui would not have waited to launch an offensive against Thiers, which the Commune did, but taken the initiative. Considering the weakness of Versailles in the opening days of the Commune, it is possible that an offensive would have succeeded. This does not mean a Blanquist-led Commune would have created socialism as opposed to a Jacobin dictatorship (neither Blanqui nor his followers had any appreciation of the socialist potential of the Commune).

Even Marx believed that it was in Thiers' interests to keep Blanqui safely away from the Commune. Marx wrote in the *Civil War in France*: "The Commune again and again had offered to exchange the archbishop, and ever so many priests into the bargain, against the single Blanqui, then in the hands of Thiers. Thiers obstinately refused. He knew that with Blanqui he would give to the Commune a head; while the archbishop would serve his purpose best in the shape of a corpse."

**Was he really a “chief”?**

At no point in Blanqui's life did he lead a movement or party of more than a few thousand dedicated cadre. However, his influence extended far beyond the ranks of his own immediate followers. Other revolutionaries who disagreed with his methods such as Karl Marx never questioned Blanqui's dedication or integrity. The future Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau and the socialist leader Paul Lafargue were at one time followers and admirers of Blanqui. In the late 1870s, when there was a mass movement for amnesty for exiled members of the Paris Commune, it coalesced around freeing Blanqui from prison. When Blanqui died in 1881, his funeral was attended by 200,000 from across the revolutionary left and the working class.

How could Blanqui command this level of support? I think this description of Blanqui by Victor Hugo provides the answer: “At certain moments he was no longer a man, but a sort of lugubrious apparition in which all degrees of hatred born of all degrees of misery seemed to be incarnated.” He lived and died for the revolution without asking for anything in return. Thought and action were interchangeable in him. Blanqui was a legend and symbol. For the bourgeoisie, he was the specter of communist revolution. For the working class, Blanqui was their undeniable champion against exploitation and for socialism.

**Why does Blanqui seem hated everywhere? As an authoritarian by the anarchists and as an eager individualist by the Orthodox Marxists? Are they mistaken?**

There are a number of points to make. First: anarchists and Marxists have always respected Blanqui as a virtuous revolutionary. Secondly, Marxists and anarchists may admire Blanqui the man, but rejected his revolutionary organizations as elitist and authoritarian. Thirdly, different parts of his legacy were taken up by anarchism such as his fierce criticism of religion. For instance, the great anarchist slogan “Ni Dieu ni Maître” comes from the name of Blanqui's last newspaper.

For the last century, “Blanquism” has been a term of abuse utilized by reform-minded Marxists in debates with their revolutionary opponents. During the Second International, socialist parties were caught in a contradiction of advocating the revolutionary transformation of society while practicing reformist politics. This created a conflict between theory and practice for many socialists. To resolve this contradiction, the German socialist Eduard Bernstein believed that Marxist theory needed to be revised by removing its revolutionary elements in order to match the reformist politics of the socialist parties. This led to the famous revisionist controversy at the end of the 19th century. Bernstein argued in *Evolutionary Socialism* (1898) that the works of the young Marx and Engels, particularly the *Communist Manifesto*, were Blanquist. As Bernstein said: “In Germany, Marx and Engels, working on the basis of the radical Hegelian dialectic, arrived at a doctrine very similar to Blanquism.” That was no accident since Hegelian dialectics, as Marx recognized, were revolutionary (although not Blanquist). Rosa Luxemburg herself recognized that Bernstein was using “Blanquism” as a stand-in to condemn any and all advocacy for socialist revolution.

Later, Bolsheviks such as Lenin and Trotsky were called “Blanquists” by Kautsky, Martov and other reformists. The Bolsheviks were not in the least Blanquist. Basically, everything that Blanqui got wrong; Lenin, Trotsky, and the Bolsheviks got right. They had a revolutionary party that championed the demands of the workers and peasants to win a majority for socialism. The Bolsheviks used Marxist theory to understand the objective conditions and when the best moment came to take power. I won't say more on the supposed connection between Blanquism and Leninism, except to say that I have written on it elsewhere — and that if the Bolshevik Revolution was actually Blanquist, they would have failed in 1917.

So why did the reformists call the Bolsheviks “Blanquist?” Trotsky provides the best answer: “The revisionists label the revolutionary content of Marxism with the word Blanquism, the more easily to enable them to fight against Marxism.” In other words, what the reformists criticized as “Blanquism” in Bolshevism and other revolutionaries were the virtues of Blanqui — his courage, dedication, willingness to fight against the odds, thinking through the paths to victory and his unapologetic communism.

**Blanqui belongs today to a certain extent to French republican history although very few French Republicans claim him?**

Throughout his life, Blanqui upheld the legacy of the French Revolution. Earlier in his life, Blanqui identified with Robespierre and later he was more attracted to Hébert. By the time Blanqui died, moderate republicans such as Clemenceau viewed him as an elder guardian of the republican tradition.

It is true that Blanqui was honored after his death with street names and monuments, he remains largely outside of the mainstream republican tradition. For one, French republicanism lost its progressive character by the end of the nineteenth century and the tricolor was identified with the defense of bourgeois society. Blanqui may have been a republican, but he was also a communist. He believed a republic should emancipate the working class and end the rule of capital. For French mainstream republicanism and, later, social democracy and the French Communist Party, who all made their peace with bourgeois republicanism, Blanqui's revolutionary and communist republicanism was not something they could uphold. It was easier for French republicanism to turn Blanqui into a harmless icon, or even better, forget about him.

**Blanqui writes works that are always very circumstantial, taken in a context, including personal. How confused is his work and life?**

It's true that Blanqui wrote mainly in regards to immediate concerns or the demands of struggle. He was not a theorist in the same sense of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao or Gramsci. We would make a mistake to judge Blanqui in the same lense we view Marxist theorists and revolutionaries who provided tools to understand and change the world. A great deal of Blanqui's theoretical ideas were confused and contradictory. His views on economics and society are simplistic. He possessed a worldview shaped by the Enlightenment rationalism, but taken to their radical conclusions (something I will discuss below).

However, Blanqui had good reason for not developing a revolutionary theory. One of the dominant trends of socialism during his life were the utopians, who spent their time developing elaborate plans for an egalitarian society. The political practice of the utopians was reformist – appealing to the “men of conscience” in the ruling class. Blanqui did not believe that the working class should ever beg for a better future from the exploiters, but they needed to fight for it with arms in hand. The key task for Blanqui was to organize the revolution in order to conquer power. Only the revolution would guarantee the new society, not the salon chatter of the utopians. He was first and foremost a man of action. Plans for the future and theories could wait after until after the bourgeoisie was defeated.

### **Was he above all a tactician?**

I mentioned above that Blanqui was not a revolutionary strategist, but he was a first-rate tactician of urban warfare. Blanqui's mastery of insurrection came from a lifetime of experience in the July Revolution of 1830, the 1839 uprising and the experience of 1848.

He codified the lessons of urban insurrection in an 1868 work entitled, *Instructions for an Armed Uprising*. In this work, he demonstrated that an uprising could not be left to chance, but it had to be planned and organized. Blanqui left detailed instructions on how to organize popular militias and build barricades. He understood that a revolution needed to take the offensive and take the centers of political and military power from the enemy. During the insurrection, they would create a Committee of Public Safety to arm the people and disarm the enemy. Once the insurgents had political power, the new order would dismantle the power of capital and enlighten the people.

The problem with Blanqui's tactics was not on the need for the armed overthrow of the old order and the creation of a revolutionary state. He was absolutely correct that there was no peaceful road to socialism. History has proved that a thousand times over. The problem was that Blanqui largely focused on the military and technical side of the revolution. The larger political and social questions remained alien to him. Nor did he believe the people themselves had any role to play in their own emancipation.

### **What is the metaphysical part of Blanqui's work?**

There are two parts to this. One is that Blanqui was not a metaphysical thinker. He was a product of the Enlightenment. He states very clearly:

“The philosophy inaugurated in the 18th century by Diderot and Holbach, proclaimed and promulgated in the 19th century as the unanimous verdicts of science, is the only possible basis of the future. The experiment is over. All the abortions of the Revolution since 89 are due to the abandonment of this philosophy. One must choose between it or the Middle Ages. It will be our flag.”

For Blanqui, Enlightenment rationality is premised on the belief that the universe is essentially knowable and our ignorance is temporary. Therefore, the condition of exploitation is not divinely ordained, but something that can be understand and overcome through collective struggle. This is perfectly in line with the legacy of the French Revolution and Jacobinism. However, Blanqui understood that to realize the promises of the Enlightenment slogans meant that bourgeois society itself had to be overcome.

There is a common reading of Blanqui encouraged by the radical critic Walter Benjamin that he was opposed to ideas of progress and adopted a metaphysical outlook with affinities to Nietzsche. The evidence of this comes from his 1872 work, *Eternity by the Stars*. In this work, Blanqui advances a multiverse theory and rejects progress. Benjamin says that *Eternity by the Stars* is Blanqui's surrender to bourgeois society. If we were to accept Benjamin's interpretation of Blanqui than he should be cast among the romantics.

A number of objections can be made to Benjamin. One: Blanqui's rejection of progress is open to dispute. Blanqui's work hastened to hold the door open for hope and action, despite everything. As he says: “For tomorrow, the events and the people will follow their course. For now on, only the unknown is before us. Like the earth's past, its future will change direction a million times... the future shall come to an end only when the globe dies. Until then, every second will bring its new bifurcation, the road taken and the road that could have been taken.” In other words, our own choices mean progress and action are still possible for the future. While the objective conditions are overwhelmingly stacked against revolutionaries, this does not mean that there is no space to be created for action. Rather, the revolutionary effort, the will to fight and to win against insurmountable odds can unveil the roads to communism. These roads are not given to anyone in advance, but are revealed in the course of struggle. That is something comforting for Blanqui, who wrote this work in the darkest days of repression after the defeat of the Paris Commune.

Secondly, there is no connection between Nietzsche and Blanqui. There is no evidence that Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return was influenced by Blanqui's work. In fact, Nietzsche was an aristocratic rebel who detested democracy and socialism. On the other hand, Blanqui's last public speech was in defense of the red flag and the socialist revolution it represented.

Thirdly, Blanqui did not surrender. He wrote *Eternity by the Stars* in 1872. Nearly a decade of political activity remained to Blanqui and he kept fighting to his last breath.

To conclude, we can say that Blanqui was not a metaphysical thinker, but the Enlightenment taken to its radical conclusion.

**What is the place in the work and life of Blanqui of friendship? Does he not politicize the question of friendship? Or does he not consider it as a policy?**

It's true that Blanqui based his politics on "friendship" or – and it is the better word – solidarity. The Blanquist conspiracies were organized into tight-knit cells of a few members (to prevent the police from infiltrating and destroying the organization). Blanqui expected that members of an underground organization would be willing to what was necessary for the revolution, which included the taking up of arms. However, he did not expect that cadre were to cold and merciless. A member was expected to virtuous and willing to fight and die for the interests of the people.

Furthermore, Blanqui believed that solidarity should unite with strengths to overcome weaknesses. Solidarity should promote bonds of friendship and cooperation as opposed to individualism. For instance, in an 1852 letter, Blanqui said that:

"You deplore the divisions within democracy. If by that you mean personal hatred, envy and the rivalries caused by ambition, I join you in condemning them; they are one of the scourges of our cause. But note that this scourge is not unique to our party – our adversaries of all stripes suffer from this as we do. Divisions within our ranks only break out more noticeably because the democratic world is more expansive and more open. These individual struggles, moreover, derive from human weakness; we must accept them and take men as they are. To lose one's temper at a natural defect is childish, if not foolish. Resolute minds know how to negotiate these obstacles that no-one can do away with but that everyone can get round or traverse. Let us therefore learn how to adapt to necessity and, while deploring the evil, not allow it to slow our forward march. I repeat, the truly political man takes no notice of these hindrances and advances straight ahead without worrying about the stones that are scattered along the path."

Now it's true that the far left has always been plagued by differences of one sort or another. Sometimes these differences are petty and other times, they involved matters of principle. Blanqui believed that virtuous revolutionaries had more in common than what divided them. To that end, he was willing to work with others and not be divided by small differences in pursuit of greater revolutionary ends. On the other hand, when it came to matters of principle – monarchy or republic, capitalist or proletarian, reform or revolution, capitalism or socialism – Blanqui would not compromise. Sides need to be taken in the class struggle. He was right to do so. Revolutionaries should make clear lines of demarcation by uniting with their real friends against their real enemies. This is an important lesson for today's left that puts "pragmatism" above principles and winds up betraying the interests of the working class each and every time.

Blanqui believed that taking sides in the class struggle means determining which side represents the universal interests of humanity. He located that in the proletariat and affirmed at one point that workers across the world shared common interests:

"Workers of all nations are brothers, and they have only one enemy: the oppressor who forces them to kill each other on the battlefields.

Everyone, workers and peasants of France, Germany or England, of Europe, Asia or America – everyone, all of us have the same toils, the same forms of suffering, the same interests. What do we have in common with this race of gilded idlers who are not content to live merely from our sweat but who also want to drink our blood?"

Blanquist politics of "friendship" taken to its conclusion requires the overthrow of bourgeois society and the creation of a new order built on solidarity and cooperation to fulfill the material needs of the proletariat.

We can conclude that Blanqui's politics of friendship or solidarity is premised on uniting virtuous communists in a single cause. In pursuit of this endeavor, it was imperative for revolutionaries not to let personal differences undermine principled unity. By doing so, the Blanquists could overthrow the oppressors of humanity and create a society based on solidarity and operation that would fulfill human needs.

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